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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 BAGHDAD 000368

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SUBJECT: MAKHMOUR REFUGEE CAMP: A WAY FORWARD THROUGH NEW
IRAQI-TURKISH COOPERATION?

REF: A. 08 BAGHDAD 907
1B. 07 GENEVA 988
1C. 08 ANKARA 158
1D. 08 BAGHDAD 317
1E. 08 BAGHDAD 983
1F. 08 ISTANBUL 156
1G. ANKARA 100

Classified By: Ambassador Ryan Crocker for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

This is a joint cable from Embassy Baghdad and Embassy Ankara

11. (C) SUMMARY: Iraqi responsiveness to increased Turkish involvement in Iraq (both with the KRG and Baghdad) may present an opportunity for progress on the longstanding humanitarian and political objective of facilitating the voluntary return to Turkey and possibly other durable solutions for 11,000 Turkish Kurdish refugees at the Makhmour refugee camp in northern Iraq. The new atmosphere, which includes Turkish commitment to a trilateral process on the PKK involving the KRG and a recent comment to the Ambassador by Turkish Special Envoy Murat Ozcelik that Turkey eventually may be prepared to look again at this issue, suggest a possible opening to re-engage the GoT on a way forward after Turkish local elections at the end of March. The KRG will need Turkish commitment to fair treatment of returning Kurd refugees, but may be prepared to consider closing the camp as part of increasing KRG-GOT cooperation. END SUMMARY.

MAKHMOUR -- 11,000 PEOPLE IN LIMBO

12. (U) Iraqi Kurdish authorities established the Makhmour refugee camp in 1991 to support Kurdish refugees from Turkey and subsequently turned the camp over to UNHCR as larger numbers of Turkish Kurds arrived in the mid-1990s amid claims of repression by the Turkish government.

13. (C) The district and city of Makhmour - which is about 90% Kurdish and 10% Arab - and the camp on its outskirts are in the governorate of Ninewa, but get virtually no aid from the capital, Mosul. Most public financing comes from the KRG in Erbil and it is likely that the district will be formally incorporated into the KRG when Article 140 boundary issues in the disputed areas are resolved. Erbil, in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), gives the town and the camp some assistance such as providing teachers for their schools, tanks of water, and electrical transformers, and permits the camp's youth to attend universities in the KRG. Camp residents have frequently stated their desire to return to their homes in Turkey (ref A), but to do so they frequently add they would need amnesty from the GoT and compensation to rebuild their homes and villages. At the end of 2008, UNHCR listed the population of Makhmour at 10,626. There are approximately 5000 Turkish Kurd refugees in other locations in northern Iraq.

¶4. (C) We believe it is in the interest of the U.S., on humanitarian grounds, to seek an agreement whereby the residents of the camp feel comfortable returning to Turkey, with the promise of better living conditions and educational opportunities. Moreover, cooperative development and effective implementation of an agreement that would see the camp closed could be a powerful confidence building measure for Ankara, Baghdad, and Erbil. We believe the time is right for the GoI, GoT, and UNHCR to work together, with the U.S. in support, to eliminate a bilateral irritant, address security concerns head on, and find durable solutions (if not return to Turkey) for the refugees.

¶5. (C) The last formal discussion of Makhmour involving Turkey, Iraq and UNHCR, with the U.S. as an observer, which QTurkey, Iraq and UNHCR, with the U.S. as an observer, which took place in April 2007 in Geneva, yielded no progress as Turkey -- after driving the process for more than 2 years -- decided at the political level not to discuss repatriation and Iraq was unwilling to discuss local integration of more than a small percentage of the refugees inside Iraq. Privately, the GoI told USDEL on the margins of the April 2007 meeting that Iraq could consider local integration of a few thousand refugees as long as Turkey accommodates return of most. UNHCR does not view third country resettlement as viable because it doubts that countries would agree to resettle them. In the last two years, repeated efforts by the USG to encourage Turkey and Iraq to take positive steps on the Makhmour Refugee Camp have not succeeded (refs B-D) because neither side was prepared to do what the other asked and resolving Makhmour was not a high priority for either government.

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¶6. (C) Embassy Ankara notes, however, discussions within the GoT have moved steadily away from a focus on "purely military" solutions to the PKK problem and more toward a comprehensive approach that takes into account long-standing complaints of the ethnic Kurdish minority in the country's southeast region. Evidence of this shift has become more public in recent weeks, including the January 1 institution of Turkey's first Kurdish-language television station on state-owned Turkish Radio and Television 6, and discussion of establishing Kurdish-language and literature faculties at universities in Ankara and Istanbul. Heretofore, closure of Makhmour has remained far down any Turkish agenda, pending substantial progress in GoT/KRG/GoI cooperation against the PKK (refs E, F). Embassy Ankara has continued to raise the issue on a regular basis with senior GoT officials (Ref G) but has usually been met with a similar response: the time is not yet ripe, GoT concerns about the security situation at the camp remain unaddressed, and the political risks for any politician to push for the camp's closure and a de facto amnesty and return package for its residents too great to bear. With increasing Turkish-Iraqi cooperation in countering the PKK presence in northern Iraq, Turkish politicians may indeed become more amenable to taking the risks involved in fashioning a domestic resettlement program and trilateral agreement on the camp's closure through which it would agree to accept back to Turkey thousands of PKK fighters and supporters. However, it is extremely unlikely such flexibility will become evident until after March 29 local elections in Turkey, which the ruling AKP has turned into a de facto nationwide referendum on its administration.

¶7. (S) The GoI and the KRG are now participating with Turkey in the Iraq-Turkey-U.S. Trilateral Security Dialogue to counter the KGK/PKK. Indications are that recent Turkish military moves (including pressure on the PKK in Northern Iraq) has hurt PKK morale, and hundreds of former PKK members have reportedly surrendered in Turkey in recent months. Separately, the Turks have worked with the KRG and have seen some progress in KRG approaches to the problem, including

public statements by Talabani and KRG participation in the Iraqi delegation to the Trilaterals. Ozcelik told Ambassador Crocker January 18 that Turkey wants to work more closely with Iraqi Kurds on a number of issues. As a result of his meeting in the KRG with KRG President Masoud Barzani, both sides agreed that they need to develop a reasonable approach to resolving PKK-related issues. We believe that Barzani would need some level of guarantee from the GoT that returning refugees would be treated fairly. In general however, we think he would welcome a solution that allows the camp to close and the refugees to return home as part of the wider negotiation with the GoT on the PKK and the overall improvement in GoT-KRG relations.

¶8. (C) UNHCR remains concerned about PKK influence in the camp, but UN security rules have not permitted UNHCR to maintain a permanent presence there or undertake frequent visits. UNHCR attempted to carry out a survey on camp services and intentions of the population in October-November 2008, but it yielded standard responses that were not useful.

To improve its ability to monitor conditions in the camp, UNHCR in late 2008 contracted the International Rescue QUNHCR in late 2008 contracted the International Rescue Committee (IRC) to implement programs for health, gender based violence, safety, and youth activity in the camp. These programs have an underlying goal to empower residents to make decisions on their own. IRC began implementation in January with an AmCit project manager, who resides in Erbil, but spends 3-4 days per week in the camp. IRC plans to bring a second international project officer on board soon. IRC will also be able to share quietly with UNHCR their observations on PKK presence and activity in the camp.

¶9. (C) UNHCR has also been contacting GoI and GoT officials to determine potential for restarting discussions of a tripartite agreement. UNHCR Iraq briefed us on UNHCR Turkey Representative Gaude's December 18 meeting with MFA Acting DG for Security Inan Ozyildiz to discuss media reports of GoT plans to repatriate "under UN auspices" PKK defectors who had not been involved in violence against Turkish interests. The press reports had indicated a possibility of using the Makhmour refugee camp as a temporary transit facility for persons who might be repatriated.

¶10. (C) Ozyildiz told UNHCR that prospects for repatriation of PKK defectors are far from being a reality and characterized the reports as wishful thinking about progress toward disarming and eradicating the PKK from northern Iraq.

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However, he suggested that at some point circumstances might allow Turkey receive ex-PKK members with no history of violence. Likewise, he added that there are no concrete plans to implement returns of the residents of Makhmour camp.

In that context, however, he noted that the Ministry of Justice had been looking at how existing legislation might allow the return of PKK defectors. Both Ozyildiz and Ozcelik have previously described to Embassy Ankara ongoing discussions within the GoT of establishing a cadre of specially trained prosecutors who would be dispatched to the Iraq-Turkey border with explicit instructions to process cases of PKK defectors, returning Makhmour residents, etc. interpreting Turkey's current repentance law as broadly and liberally as possible to enable in essence all who wish to return to Turkey to do so. It will remain politically difficult for any political party to endorse an explicit "amnesty" absent cessation of hostilities, but the hope is a liberal interpretation of existing law from which hundreds of former PKK fighters have already benefited will suffice to attract the vast majority of the remaining fighters who remain in northern Iraq. Whether the same law is utilized to offer assurances of non-prosecution to non-combatant supporters of the PKK, as the vast majority of Makhmour residents are, or such assurances are otherwise provided in the trilateral agreement on the camp's closure, remains to be

seriously discussed within GoT circles, but clearly will have to be tackled. Ozyildiz spoke positively about continuing high level contacts between Turkey and Iraq, including the KRG, following the Turkish PM's visit to Baghdad in July. He viewed these contacts, the establishment of the Trilateral Security Dialogue and a bilateral military cooperation agreement as reflecting a new positive atmosphere and desire to solve the longstanding problem of PKK presence in Iraq.

¶11. (C) UNHCR Iraq Representative Daniel Endres discussed Makhmour in separate meetings in January with Minister of National Security, Deputy Minister of Interior and a Director General from the Ministry of Human Rights. National Security Minister al Waeli had recently visited Makhmour and asked to see UNHCR to express his concerns about conditions and services in the camp and discuss prospects for repatriation of the residents. Endres observed that the new U.S.-Turkey-Iraq security process had refocused some attention on Makhmour and that both the U.S. and Iraq desired to restart discussions with Turkey on repatriating the residents. Endres commented that the GoT is conditioning resumption of negotiations on assurances that the camp is civilian in nature.

¶12. (C) Waeli noted the importance of confidence building and commented that the GoT and GoI both view UNCHR's new implementing partner, IRC, as independent and neutral. Waeli expressed satisfaction that one area of IRC's focus would be youth activities, which were lacking. UNHCR's other GoI interlocutors stressed the importance of maintaining the civilian nature of the camp and minimizing PKK influence and recruitment. Waeli urged UNHCR to re-convene the tripartite process (Iraq, Turkey, UNHCR, with U.S. as observer), which last met in April 2007. After Endres suggested that a tripartite meeting would need careful preparation and willing Turkish participation and reminded him of MFA leadership of the process, they agreed that a useful next step would be a U.S., UNHCR, Iraq meeting, including MFA and KRG Interior Minister Sinjari.

RECOMMENDATION

¶13. (C) New security cooperation arrangements among Turkey, Iraq (including the KRG) and the U.S. offer a new opportunity to address the underlying issues which have prevented the parties from resolving Makhmour. We will consult with the GoI and UNHCR in the coming weeks on enhancing security and monitoring of the camp, with a view toward making it easier for the GoT to look again at accepting thousands of PKK fighters and supporters for reintegration once elections have passed in Turkey and political pressure eases somewhat on decision makers. We will also need to work with UNHCR and the GoI/KRG to find other durable solutions for those camp residents who either cannot or do not wish to return to Turkey.

CROCKER